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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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Bureau of Animal Industry
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KARAKUL SHEEP QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Prepared jointly by

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The demand for information in regard to Karakul sheep has become so great that there is need for statements of specific information concerning this subject to facilitate the handling of correspondence. Accordingly, this series of questions and answers has been prepared on the basis of the type of inquiries that have been most numerous. For additional information on the subject, including illustrations of Karakul sheep and lambskins the reader is referred to Farmers' Bulletin 1632, Karakul Sheep.

The Government's Karakul flock herein mentioned is the flock maintained by the Bureau of Animal Industry at Beltsville, Md.

1. Question.--Where can Karakul sheep be raised? Answer.--
Karakul sheep can be raised in all sections of the United States that are suitable for other breeds of sheep.

2. Q.--Are Karakul sheep as hardy as other breeds of sheep? A.--
The breed is noted for its hardiness and is able to exist and do well under adverse conditions, but responds well to good care.

3. Q.--What type of Karakul stock are to be found in the United States? A.--Purebred, crossbred, and grade animals. Intercrossing of Karakuls with other breeds has produced considerable variation in the type of sheep generally classified as Karakuls.

4. Q.--Where may high-quality Karakul breeding stock be obtained?
A.--The most satisfactory breeding stock will probably be found in the flocks of those breeders who have established a system of keeping detailed individual records of their sheep followed by intelligent selection and mating from the standpoint of fur production.

5. Q.--Where may names of Karakul breeders be obtained? A.--Names of Karakul breeders having stock for sale may be obtained from the Secretary of the Karakul Fur Sheep Registry, Friendship, Wisc., a national registry.

6. Q.--Does the Government maintain a registry for purebred Karakul sheep? A.--The Government does not maintain a registry for this breed or any of the other breeds of sheep. The business of registration is strictly a private undertaking. The operation and conduct of registry associations are the responsibility of the breeder members, such responsibility being delegated by the members to the officers whom they choose to administer the affairs of their organization.

7. Q.--How much do Karakul sheep cost? A.--Prices of purebred registered Karakul sheep will usually range from \$25 to \$50 per head. For extra good ones the prices may range from \$100 to \$300 per animal. If more than \$50 for purebred ewes and \$100 for purebred rams are paid there should be evidence that they are considerably above the average in the production of high-quality fur. In fact, if these high prices are paid for the sheep the only means of obtaining a fair return on the investment would be through their use for the production of purebred registered breeding stock to be sold in turn at high prices.

8. Q.--In what months of the year do Karakuls normally breed? A.--In general, the breeding season extends from September to January, the same as for other breeds of sheep. Some ewes may breed as early as August and others as late as May.

9. Q.--At what age do the ewes first breed? A.--The results of an experiment in the Government's purebred and grade Karakul flocks have shown that approximately 59 percent of the ewe lambs breed at 7 to 12 months of age. Age at first conception averaged 14 months for ewes in this experiment.

10. Q.--Is it a common occurrence for ewes to have two crops of lambs in one year? A.--During a four-year period (1942-1946), with continual exposure to the ram, approximately 20 percent of the dry ewes, or those from which lambs were pelted, had two lambings per year, while only about 3 percent of the ewes that nursed their lambs to weaning had two lambings per year.

11. Q.--How frequently do twin births occur? A.--Records from the Government's purebred Karakul flock during a 9-year period show that only about 5 percent of the births yield twins.

12. Q.--What is the average span of life of Karakul sheep? A.--Under good conditions of farm management Karakuls have lived to the age of 7 or 8 years, or about 2 years longer than sheep of the dark-faced mutton breeds.

13. Q.--How long are Karakul rams useful as breeding animals? A.--Their period of service is usually longer than rams of other breeds and it is not unusual to have them serviceable to the age of 8 years or more.

14. Q.--How may high-quality Karakuls be recognized? A.--No adult characters have been observed that may be depended upon as a reliable index to the fur-producing capacities of these sheep. The quality of the lamb fur produced is the best index to the value of breeding stock. Therefore, the best opportunity to obtain high-quality fur producers would be offered through selecting the stock when the mature ewes have young lambs at their sides and thus show the type of fur which they are producing.

15. Q.--How should Karakuls be fed and handled? A.-- Karakuls can be fed the ordinary grains and roughages generally grown on farms and can be handled in the same manner as other breeds of sheep. More detailed information on the feeding and handling of sheep will be found in Farmers' Bulletin No. 840, "Farm Sheep Raising for Beginners," a copy of which may be obtained free from the Bureau of Animal Industry on request.

16. Q.--Are Karakuls subject to the same ailments as other breeds of sheep? A.--Yes. In the Government's flock the principal losses have resulted from pneumonia, internal parasites, and injury.

17. Q.--What is the cost of maintaining a flock of Karakuls? A.--The cost of maintenance will be similar to that of other breeds of sheep raised in the same section of the country in which it is proposed to raise Karakul sheep. Specific information of this kind could likely be obtained from the animal husbandry department of the agricultural college of that particular State.

18. Q.--Is the production of Karakul lambskin fur a profitable undertaking? A.--Breeders find it difficult consistently to produce lambskin fur sufficiently high in quality to command prices that would be profitable unless they can get breeding stock at relatively low prices and maintain them at low cost. This is because the quality of lambskins even from purebred Karakuls is extremely variable.

19. Q.--Is experience necessary to successful fur production? A.--The Karakul sheep enterprise is generally regarded as a highly specialized undertaking. For best results one should possess some knowledge not only of feeding, breeding, and management of sheep but also of the fur market. Those who have had experience with Karakul fur production are impressed with the complex nature of this fur and the need for an understanding of what constitutes merit in this product.

20. Q.--What is Persian lamb fur? A.--Persian lamb is the name given to one of the classes of lambskins produced by Karakul sheep.

21. Q.--Where do the majority of Persian lambskins come from? A.--They are produced in Bokhara (U.S.S.R.), Afghanistan (Herat), Southwest Africa, Bessarabia, Shiraz (Iran), Baghdad and Salzfelle (Iraq), and India. Approximately 4,000,000 Persian lambskins are imported annually into the United States. The annual production in this country does not exceed 8,000 skins.

22. Q.--Where are the best Persian lambskins produced? A.--The fur trade prefers pelts from Bokhara, because they are heavily furred with well-developed curls and possess a pleasing pattern all over the back and well down on the sides including the legs and tail. The luster is quite brilliant. The curl may be either tightly or loosely formed. Afghanistan pelts are quite similar to those from Bokhara except perhaps the pelts are not as well covered with uniform curls. The pelts from India and Southwest Africa are also becoming quite popular with the trade. The same is true of those produced in Bessarabia and Rumania.

23. Q.--What factors influence the value of the lambskins? A.--The general appearance of the pelt, size, pattern, uniformity of curl, tightness, luster, and thickness of leather.

24. Q.--What are the usual general market classes of Persian lambskins? A.--Skins are quite variable and any classification is quite general. The size of curl is emphasized and skins having small, medium, large, broad, and flat curls are made into separate classes. Of course, there are several grades within each class depending upon such things as quality, tightness of curl, luster, pattern, and general appearance.

25. Q.--Which type of skin brings the most money? A.--Those that best meet current market requirements. The size of curl in demand will vary from year to year depending upon style changes. Usually the small curl is most desired for fur coats and the larger curl for trimming cloth coats.

26. Q.--How may one become familiar with the desirable qualities and grading of the fur? A.--The best way to become familiar with the quality of Persian lamb fur and the methods of grading is to handle the pelts in the raw fur market. It is possible for one to visit raw fur establishments and become familiar with classification, grading, and market requirements of these pelts.

27. Q.--What is the predominating color of lambskins? A.--The predominating color is black, although brown, white, and gray pelts are produced.

28. Q.--Are all the pelts dyed before they are made into garments? A.--All the black Persian lamb pelts are dressed and dyed before they are made into garments. Most of the brown and gray pelts are dressed but not dyed. Dyeing adds to the natural luster, and colors the leather so it will not show through the fur.

29. Q.--What is golyak? A.--It is a Russian name which is applied to the pelts of lambs or kids born prematurely, or still-born, possessing very short hair. It means "nude", "very poor", and "with nothing."

30. Q.--What is meant by broadtail? A.--Broadtail refers to the pelt of a Karakul lamb born prematurely or dead and in some instances of those killed within a few hours after birth. The hair is undeveloped and since the hair grows in different directions and reflects light the appearance is "moire", meaning watery design. Such premature births are not forced but are caused by accidents while herding the sheep from one area to another. Many times the flocks encounter snow and rain which may cause abortions.

31. Q.--Is there a steady demand for Persian lambskins? A.--Yes. The demand for this commodity has increased in the United States during the last 25 years. The fur trade in this country could consume all the Karakul lambskins that can be produced in the United States if these pelts possessed the same good quality characteristic of those imported from foreign countries.

32. Q.--How may one sell Persian lambskins? A.--Raw lambskins may be sold directly to fur merchants or raw-fur receiving houses specializing in this commodity, or they may be sent to the auction companies for sale on a commission basis. More specific information on this subject may be obtained from the Executive Director, American Fur Merchants Association, 393 Seventh Avenue, and the New York Auction Co., Inc., 226 West 26th Street, both New York 1, N. Y. The Department is not in a position to list all agencies engaged in merchandising furs and no discrimination is intended in mentioning only the above.

33. Q.--What prices can be expected for lambskins? A.--Raw lambskins produced in the United States have brought from 50 cents to \$12.00 per pelt. Occasionally pelts of exceptional quality have been produced, but the average quality of pelts produced in the United States must be greatly improved to equal the average quality of imported pelts. The average raw-pelt value of 273 lambskins produced during the 10-year period 1936-1945 from the purebred flock of the Bureau of Animal Industry was \$4.81 per pelt based on appraisals by New York City furriers. This price is believed to be representative of the average raw-pelt values that can be expected on lambskin fur produced by purebred Karakul flocks in this country.

34. Q.--How much wool do Karakul sheep produce? A.--The 740 fleeces of unscoured wool grown on purebred Karakul sheep in the Bureau of Animal Industry's flock during the 17 years 1929-1945, inclusive, averaged for a year's growth 6.0 pounds. The fleeces of this lot that were from mature rams 8.4, and from yearling rams 8.9 pounds. Some of the mature ewes that produced these fleeces were very old and some had shed a part of their fleeces. The extreme range in weights for all the 740 fleeces was from 1.2 pound to 14.3 pounds.

35. Q.--What use and value has the wool? A.--Karakul wool is lustrous but coarse. It can be made into beautiful rugs and carpets and it is also used in the manufacture of blankets and automobile robes. However, its uses are rather limited when compared with those of finer grades of wool, and when handled through regular marketing channels it sells at from one-half to three-fourths of the price received for good-quality white wool produced by the more generally established breeds.

36. Q.--Is the Karakul of value for the production of meat? A.--Since the Karakul is primarily a fur-producing breed no attempt has ever been made to develop a mutton strain. Nevertheless, the meat is wholesome, and the wether lambs and those with extremely inferior fur can be fed and marketed to defray part of the expense of production while grading up the ewe flock to a point where the pelts of the lambs will be more valuable as fur than the lambs would be for meat if grown to marketable size.

37. Q.--What is a reasonable income that may be expected from Karakul sheep kept primarily for lambskin fur production? A.--On the basis of results from the Government's Karakul sheep experiments at Beltsville, Md., the gross returns from raw pelts and wool have amounted to about \$5 or \$6 per ewe per year for ewes of straight Karakul breeding bred to purebred Karakul rams. The results indicate that by further careful culling and selection of the ewes and rams the average returns may be increased. However, the normal annual range of \$4 to \$10 gross income per ewe of the breeds of sheep raised for market lambs and wool is about as much income as can normally be expected from high grade or purebred Karakul sheep primarily kept for the production of lambskin fur.

38. Q.--What assurance has the beginner that he will have Karakuls with the capacity to produce desirable lambskins? A.--The beginner must realize that considerable variation in the quality of fur produced by Karakuls is to be expected. Sheep purchased from any Karakul breeder could not be entirely relied upon to produce high-quality fur consistently because of the existent variation in all stock. However, if animals from a long line of ancestry recorded for fur quality could be found this would be a good index as to what could be expected in the fur quality of their progeny.

39. Q.--Upon what does profitable fur production depend? A.--From an economic viewpoint, profitable fur production in this country depends mainly on using selected purebred Karakul rams in grading up flocks of high-grade Karakul ewes developed from certain inexpensive foundation ewe stock of the established wool and mutton breeds of sheep. Ewes of the crossbred type having at least 50 percent long-wool inheritance can be purchased at the stockyards and this would be the most economical means of acquiring foundation ewe stock. Whatever the breed selected for foundation stock in the grading-up process, marketable lambskins cannot be expected, except for occasional pelts, before the third generation of top-crossing the ewe stock to purebred Karakul rams.

40. Q.--What are the primary factors that retard the development of the Karakul sheep breeding business? A.--High prices for breeding stock and the moderate to low prices for the average of the lambskins produced.

41. Q.--How may the Karakul sheep industry be developed? A.--Since high-quality Karakul breeding stock is scarce and high in price, development of the industry will be accomplished largely through breeders who will practice rigid selection in their flocks based on detailed individual fur-production records, thus raising the fur-producing levels of the Karakul stock and making it more generally available at reasonable prices.

42. Q.--What is the Government doing to improve Karakul sheep? A.--Since the establishment of its Karakul flock at Beltsville, Md., in 1928, Bureau of Animal Industry research activities with these sheep have been concerned primarily with selective breeding for the improvement of fur. Experiments are conducted involving sheep husbandry, genetics, animal-fiber technology, and technical studies of the lambskin fur. The object of this project is to determine the physical properties of lambskin fur representing different degrees of merit and to study the genetic basis of such important characters as curl, luster, and color. Strains of Karakul sheep are bred to purify them genetically for the uniform production of highly desirable fur.